

**Figuring Out Native Masculinity:
Slow Dispossession, the Politics of Storytelling and Uyghur Male Friendship**
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Abstract: This article argues that for young Uyghur rural-to-urban migrants in Northwest China storytelling, and the ethics of friendship that come from listening and reading stories, are a stabilizing force that responds to conditions of what it names “slow dispossession”—the long seemingly endless process of eliminating minority sociality. Drawing on the experiences of a migrant named Ablakim and how his dreams were rerouted by structural forces, it argues that among underemployed Uyghur men homosocial relationships that arise from hearing and reading stories are an emerging source of native masculinity. Rather than focusing solely on the trauma of the ethno-racial policing that young men experience, it considers how such conditions give rise to *jan-jiger dost* or “life and liver friendships,” that help men to stay alive.

Keywords: *Dispossession, Masculinity, Friendship, Racialization, Terror, Uyghur, China*

The first time I met Ablikim he was sitting in the corner farthest from the door. He was a thin man with a closely-trimmed moustache. He sat hunched over, his shoulders drawn in. He seemed nervous. As is customary among Uyghurs, no one introduced us. The previous week I had met a young man named Batur at a Turkish coffee shop in Ürümchi, the capital of the so-called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Now we were at his apartment for a birthday party. I assumed the man in the corner might be Batur’s cousin visiting from the countryside. Like many newcomers to the city he seemed alienated and withdrawn. We told each other our names, but I still wasn’t really sure how to place him. Over the course of the evening he sat in the corner quietly, his eyes darting around the room. It wasn’t until much later, when we were walking home side-by-side that he began to speak. Ablikim didn’t like speaking in groups.

He wasn’t a new arrival from the countryside; he was Batur’s closest friend. They had been living in the city together for nearly a decade. Ablikim had a bachelor’s degree from a university in the city. Because of this certification, he was able to find more institutional affiliation and security in the city, but only for a time. He had recently quit his job as a teacher in a government-operated vocational school. Since then he had been trying to find another job: a

job he liked. He had worked as a bookkeeper in a Uyghur fast-food chicken restaurant. He had gone to Beijing, a distance of nearly 2000 miles, to try to find a job as a business consultant with Batur. He had come back to Ürümchi with Batur to try to work for a Turkish food import company as a warehouse manager, but none of these jobs had worked out. He said: “I went to Beijing, and then back to Ürümchi, just to try to figure things out. But I didn’t get anything figured out. I’m still trying to figure things out.”

As I built a friendship with Ablikim I was struck by how his story as a failed professional and the importance of his friendships resonated with the experiences of the dozens of low-income Uyghur migrants I observed. Although Ablikim had been able to find institutional support as a teacher for a time, like migrants with less formal education, he too had been caught up in the tumult of social violence in Xinjiang. He had first found a job during the summer of 2009 – the same summer when Ürümchi was rocked by Uyghur citizen-rights protests over the unprosecuted mob killing of Uyghur workers by Han migrants in Eastern China. The protests quickly escalated into race riots in which hundreds of people were killed and thousands of young Uyghur men were disappeared (Human Rights Watch 2009). Although he had been in a nearby city during the riots, when he came back to Ürümchi a few weeks later to take up his position as a chemistry teacher, he had been detained by the police. He was let go after a drawn-out interrogation, but that experience, along with countless other experiences of everyday racism over subsequent years, had wounded him to the point that he had finally dropped out of mainstream Chinese city life and stopped looking for work outside the Uyghur enclave at Ürümchi’s south end. He gave up his job and developed a constant tremor in his hands. He stayed in his apartment for days at a time, sleeping little. He often spoke about suicide and how his friendship with Batur prevented him from ending his life.

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In many ways Ablikim's position was symptomatic of displacements and dispossessions that were happening across the developing world in the first two decades of the 2000s. As capitalism spread around the globe, millions, if not billions, of people were moving from rural poverty to urban precarity; they were being forced to move away from a fragile yet ontologically stable existence as subsistence farmers by urban development, industrial agriculture and forms of dispossession. Over the past two decades in China, 221 million people have abandoned their small plots of land for the hustle of city streets and small concrete apartments (Xiong 2015); since the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is one of the primary receivers of Han migrant urban construction workers, miners and oil workers, the majority of the 22 million inhabitants of the province are also living far from home. For Ablikim—and the hundreds of thousands of other Uyghur migrants to the big city of Ürümqi in 2014—an additional repulsion was folded into this economic and class-based structural foment. The ethno-racial atmosphere of “counter-terrorism” Ablikim encountered in the city was a mechanism that marked and sorted their bodies in unique and particular ways. In the end they often found themselves slotted by discriminatory hiring and renting practices into the Uyghur enclave at the southern end of Ürümqi, where, for rural underemployed migrants, the violence of ethno-racial policing mixed with feelings of desperation to find firm social footing. Local police entered Uyghur migrants' homes on a weekly basis, searching for unregistered Uyghurs from the countryside. Checkpoints popped up randomly on street corners and Uyghur men were asked to produce their papers and allow their cell-phones to be scanned for links to “terrorism.” Jobs were hard to find, particularly if a migrant was alone in the city. Life was a hustle.

As Ablikim said one day, “The countryside felt like a lake of stagnant water, but the city feels like a ‘raging river’ (Uy: *derya süyi dawalghup turatti*).” The relative stability of a stagnant, “boring” Uyghur community on the flat desert plain in Southern Xinjiang had been replaced by the frenetic pace and dangerous terrain of a city where he was surrounded by strangers. The word Ablikim used to describe the “raging” river, *dawalghup*, also carries with it the feeling of social precariousness, of life in chaos, agitation and ferment. In the big city, Ablikim and the thousands of unemployed young Uyghur men just like him found themselves trying to make sense of a Chinese world while using a Uyghur framework. And as they tried to enter that social flow they constantly found themselves pushed into eddies along the side. Since they were often cut off from their extended families through the process of migration, the violence of this movement made these single young men cling to each other.

As Alan Bray (2003) has noted, the conditions of global capitalism of the late twentieth century have produced a “crisis of friendship” (2003: 2). Increasingly, he argued, elective relationships have appeared as essential elements in processes of identification and political affiliations outside of the dominant norms of citizenship and domestic relations. What stands apart here is that, given the precarious conditions of the racialized city, Uyghur homosocial friendships were not elective. They were experienced as essential to survival.¹

The hope that was associated with the seeming openness and vital movement that came from economic migration often became a source of cruelty when young men like Ablikim discovered that the dreams to which they had been attached were either “*impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic” (Berlant 2011, 24). In some cases, the religious freedom they anticipated or the culture work opportunities they found in the city were later used by the police as evidence for detention or expulsion from the city. In Ablikim’s case the “too toxic” aspect of

his hopes came from the way he “won the lottery” and received a government job as a vocational school teacher. Since job placement rates for Uyghur college students with baccalaureate degrees were now less than 15 percent due to Xinjiang’s state-enforced job discrimination (Tohti 2015), finding a government job in the city was often seen as a major stroke of luck and a way of escaping a life of policing and poverty in small towns in the countryside. Receiving a government position as a civil servant was considered the gold standard of vocational achievement by many Uyghurs, since it offered a guaranteed salary and a full range of social service benefits. Because of this, and because the state only allotted a small percentage of jobs to Uyghur applicants while the rest are given to Han, the competition for government jobs in the city was extremely intense. Often less than three Uyghur applicants out of 100 were offered these positions. Clearly, since he received an opportunity like this, Ablikim enjoyed a certain amount of privilege relative to other migrants. Yet after only working for a year he realized that his role at the school was merely that of fulfilling the school’s political obligation to build a false sense of “ethnic unity” (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*). In the framework of multicultural domination: he was a diversity hire. The culture work of “ethnic unity” in the context of the Chinese settler-colonial project was, in effect, an unequivocal promotion of Uyghur acceptance of Han chauvinism and settlement in towns throughout the Uyghur homeland. The “unity” it fostered was Uyghur submission to the privileging of state-Han control of their way of life. The falseness of his life as a “success,” as defined by his luck in finding a secure job, made him deeply unhappy. Rather than teaching science he was tasked with spreading a message of Chinese state domination in Uyghur communities.

Yet though the promise of individual striving was often blocked, I found that migrants like Ablikim did find limited ways of coping with the impasse of this dispossession. Like many

young Uyghur men, Ablikim had the support of a friend who was standing beside him pulling him back to his feet. At times he felt that the supportive dialogues of friendship were the only thing that kept him alive and struggling to find a way forward. In this article I argue that storytelling and the ethics of friendship that come from listening to stories can act as a sort of treatment for desperate feelings of vulnerability on the margins of mainstream societies. More precisely, I argue that among young, underemployed Uyghur men the friendships that arise from hearing and reading stories of dispossession are an emerging source of existential stability. The ethics of friendship that respond to structural violence has had the effect of producing a new genre of storytelling and a new political framing for young Uyghur men in the city.

Slow Dispossession, Ethics of Friendship, Storytelling

During the two years of fieldwork I conducted in Ürümchi since 2011, many friends and acquaintances told me about the way their friends and members of their families had been disappeared or been detained indefinitely by the state for resisting or appearing to resist Chinese settler colonialism (Human Rights Watch 2009). Disappearances of young Uyghur men became so endemic that local police stations issued a form for families to fill out to request information as to the whereabouts of their loved ones. If they were able to recover the living bodies of their sons and brothers from reeducation facilities and labor camps, often they found them in states of psychic brokenness – frail shells of the vital persons they had once been. My friends spoke often about the struggle to overcome their fear that the same might happen to themselves. They talked about how they had to swallow their pride and not react when confronted with institutional forms of everyday discrimination. They compared Xinjiang to contemporary North Korea and their ethno-racial position to the Jews in Germany, just before the Holocaust. They saw their situation as both a typical site of China's rapid capitalist development and an extreme case of Chinese

ethnocracy and colonization. Dispossession was forced upon Uyghurs in the city since they were often legally prevented from renting and working by the state. Since their bodies were seen as worthless and not worth grieving, they were made to bear the burden of “underemployment, legal disenfranchisement and differential exposure to violence and death” (Butler 2009: 25). One way into an understanding of how it is possible to live under the conditions of dispossession, is through examining a particular kind of friendship between Uyghur young men following the protests and riots of 2009.

As I grappled with these stories and experiences I found that recent research which frames the lives of the dispossessed as an emerging political effect of global capitalism stimulating for thinking through the trauma and daily struggles of marginalized people in post-2009 Ürümqi. The conditions of dispossession under which Uyghurs were living might be referred to as what Judith Butler (2009) and Anne Allison (2013) describe as conditions of “precarity.” However, because of the way they were made the object of a kind of counter-terrorism industrial complex, in the Uyghur case precarity is more than simply underemployment. It is also the psychic trauma that arises from the negative intersection of dispossession, exploitation and new sequences of racialization—a way of rendering some people more vulnerable than others. Throughout the modern history of capitalism, conditions of dispossession have existed on the margins of societies. Karl Marx ([1852] 1963) conceptualized the dispossessed as the “lumpen proletariat.” This “lumpenization” process refers to the ways in which groups of people, often ethno-racial others, have been refused a class status and instead find ways to work and live in a “gray zone” of the informal economy and “flexible” labor (Bourgeois and Schoenberg: 19).² Thinking about dispossession as a processual working out of life, allows for a focus less on “zones of exception” (Agamben 1998) than an insistence that

“engagement with the lives of others must be attendant to the slippages, fraying, and importantly, the exposure of life itself” (Al-Mohammad 2012, 600). Starting from a focus on dispossession as a long slow process refocuses attention on the way lives are not just caught, but also are lived in states of existential instability. This analytic, something I name *slow dispossession* highlights both forms of exploitation and domination but also the agency, control and feeling that emerge over the long duration of first multicultural domination, state-directed material dispossession and now the effects of violent counter-terrorism. Unlike dispossession through war and other forms of quick, immediate, material violence, colonial forms of dispossession often occur over a long, seemingly unending duration. Slow dispossession as an analytic draws attention toward the problems faced by marginalized people and how they figure them out. By turning our attention to the minutiae of vulnerable life, this approach supplements existing scholarship on the macro-politics of Uyghur identity (Bovingdon 2010; Holdstock 2015) by forcing us to take seriously how the lives of the differentially dispossessed are lived.

For Uyghur migrant men who had been separated from their families through these processes, maintaining close friendships was a principal way of maintaining a sense of stability in their lives. As in other contexts of precarity, ethical imperatives of their friendships turned on an obligation of “being-with:” of sharing in the pains and joys of each other; mobilizing resources to help the other when they are in need (Al-Mohammad 2010). Most importantly for Uyghur migrants, “being-with” (Uy: *bille*) meant listening to the other; reading the friend in such a way that he or she came to feel as though their lives had entered into the same experience. Solitary Uyghur migrants, most of whom were male, thus came to feel as though the narrative of their lives were seen. In contemporary Islamic societies, such as Uyghur society, gender segregation along with changes in methods of production have led to a greater reliance on

homosocial relations (Ouzgane 2006), particularly in the process of migration (Rana 2011: 119). In an era of market liberalization in China, relationships were often inflected by the utility of socio-economic networks or *guanxi* relations (Smart 1999; Mann 2000) or “associations” (Uy: *munasivet*). Not all relationships were able to turn into friendships, but as conditions of dispossession intensified, they had the effect of forcing young Uyghur men to identify with each other.

Thinking in more ontological terms, theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault have argued that friends are those with whom “we share the practice of becoming who we are” (Webb 2003, 119). Speaking in general terms then, homosocial Uyghur friendship differed from other forms of community and kinship in that in such friendships young men were directly pulled into each other’s vulnerability even when those sources of insecurity were not their own. The way Uyghur young men thought, judged, and willed their futures were at times reshaped through these relationships. Close friendships thus often provided a space in which they could be self-reflective while at the same time tentative and experimental across difference. Unlike with their relations with others, particularly Han acquaintances, Uyghur friends often shared ideas that they had not yet fully considered; they talked about their feelings and, at times, read each other’s minds.

Foucault’s conception of “caring for the self” might be characterized by a state of equilibrium: a “steady *flow*” (Webb 134) that opens to a future, which is new but also remains consistent. As Foucault’s interlocutor David Webb puts it regarding the “flow of friendship”:

Regularities in the flow are ... shaped in part by regularities in our own practice. If my friend and I meet regularly, we construct a pattern that shapes our existence together. (137).

A high intensity flow of friendship—a friendship that springs from shared life experience—can result in a disproportionate influence on the self, relative to other social relationships. It calls friends to a “positive ethics” (Mahmood 2005: 27). An ethics that was oriented beyond a set of regulatory norms toward the demands of changing historical circumstances and emerging political formations. In many situations where family relations were attenuated by distance or delayed by instability, as they were for Uyghur migrants, friendships between men became a way to make life endurable.

In gender-segregated “native” (*yerliq*) Uyghur society, “friendship” has historically been a major source of ethical obligation and sociality. In some areas of the Uyghur homeland people commonly used the word “friend” (*adash*) at the beginning and end of every sentence when speaking to anyone of the same gender and generation. There were many words for friend: *dost*, *adash*, *aghine*, *borader*. All of these variations combined with adjectival modifiers lent a different color and tone to the sort of friendship being described. These relationships ranged from social kinship across a body politic to ritualized forms of fellowship between hosts and travelers. But Uyghurs reserved a special referent for the sort of friendship that is shared by young men such as Ablikim and Batur, the figures I introduced at the beginning of this article. They referred to that sort of friendship as a “life and liver friendship” (*jan-jiger dost*) – meaning they were friends who shared the same life-spirit and liver organ. The liver was considered the seat of courage in Uyghur epistemology (much like the gall of a gall bladder connotes a sense of audacity in other contexts). The Uyghur concept of a “life and liver” friend conveyed the feeling not only of the “soul-mate” aspect of close friendship but also a willingness to sacrifice one’s self for the other as “blood-brothers.”

The friendship inscribed in contemporary “life and liver” friendships came from multiple sources. Since Uyghurs had a long tradition of pre-modern urban living in the oasis cities along the old Silk Road, the development of specialized trades and crafts have long affected the life-paths of young men. For centuries, a minority of young men have left their hometowns and traveled to nearby cities to apprentice as bakers, tinsmiths, woodworkers and other professions. Often these earlier forms of migration were formed around natal-home relationships. Young men who shared the same hometown (Uy: *yurtdash*) were often the first people to become friends in a new urban location. The second element, in the contemporary iteration of “life and liver” friendships, was a newer development. Often close friends were classmates (Uy: *sawaqdash*) from the same school. This emphasis on the classmate relationships was a recent phenomenon that corresponded with Chinese late-socialist family planning policy and the organization of Chinese school systems. Since most Uyghur families had only three children and since the education system placed children within a singular, segmented, unchanging class throughout primary and secondary education, many young Uyghurs (as with Chinese classmates [*tongban tongxue*] more generally) have come to think of classmates of the same gender in terms similar to that of siblings. In the case of Ablikim and Batur, they had been classmates for over 17 years. All through their lives they had shared an interwoven life-path. The Chinese multicultural institutions of family planning and education that were meant to corral their bodies into permitted Chinese “model minority” slots had shaped the conditions of the relationships that sustained their autonomy.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed how young men from across the Uyghur homeland used “life and liver” friendships as resource to survive life in the city. For example, I met two young jade sellers from Yaken, Hasan and Adil, who described their relationship as one

of life and liver friends. I met a young waiter named Yusup who was best friends with a young kabob-seller named Ibrahim. I met a cell-phone repairman from a small village outside of Khotan who had a *jan-jiger dost* from the same village named Erkin. These homosocial friendships in the broader context of Uyghur dispossession demonstrates that the way young men struggled with dispossession was never fully singular. For young Uyghur men in the city, living with dispossession was often a struggle of friendship. Friendships did not offer a cure for the exposure they felt in the “raging” (Uy: *dawalghup*) torrent of the racialized city, but they provided a space to narrate it—to try to “figure things out” as Ablikim mentioned when I first met him—and thus an avenue to cope with it “together” (Uy: *billa*).

One of the things friendships did was to give young Uyghur men a daily space for the “subjective in-between” of storytelling (Arendt 1958: 182-184 in Jackson 2002: 11). As many theorists of the politics of narrative have argued, storytelling is a way of giving order and consistency to events in the lives of modernist subjects, who often begin to experience their lives as a narrative of “free will.” In personal stories, modernist subjects—often the narrators—become the main characters rather than bit players on the sidelines of social change. It is not just that stories give meaning to human lives in general, but rather that they change how people “*experience* the events that have befallen us by symbolically restructuring them” (Jackson 2002: 16). By defining lives, stories supply people with a way of overcoming how social structures block subjects from realizing their hopes. By narrating existence and staging representations of their lives, modernist subjects make their words stand in the place of the world. As Jackson points out, what is crucial here is to understand that the stories that are told are not identical with the structure of societies – rather storytelling is important because it shows subjects how they live. Their importance rests then not in whether stories are true or whether they offer a sense of

hope, but in what they indicate about societies and what this knowledge enables subjects to do. Of course, there are many kinds of stories. Some stories confirm what is already known, while others call into question what had previously been thought of as sound knowledge. For Uyghur friends, this latter form, stories which undermined authority and cast aside dominant “regimes of truth” (Foucault 2010) such as the propaganda public sphere of the “People’s War,” could be powerful weapons in maintaining a sense of existential well-being. They could narrate the impasse of slow dispossession when friends felt trapped in a futureless world.

The obligations that sprung from dispossession provided the conditions of possibility for stories to be told and heard among friends. Since the majority of Uyghur migrants to the city were single young men who were delaying marriage in order to make a better life for their families back in the countryside, there was also a strong gender component to this phenomenon as well. Young men were sent to the city because they were young men. Uyghur parents often thought that unmarried young women would not be able to survive in the city as under-employed hustlers. Young women did come to the city to work as maids in wealthy Uyghur homes, but they were less of a public presence. In the patriarchal structure of Uyghur society, they were seen as a part of the household where they worked. Young men on the other hand were often on their own. They often came to the city full of masculine energy, the pride of their families and their villages. They wore their mustaches with dignity and wore their single set of clothes boldly. Yet, it was precisely this appearance that rendered them untrustworthy and dangerous as potentially an “ethnic separatist” or “Islamic terrorist” – in the eyes of Han settlers and the police. Uyghur men, like brown and black men elsewhere in the world, were often seen as guilty of harboring violent intentions until proven otherwise. Thousands of underemployed proud young men without families who faced widespread discrimination thus provided the social ground for these

emerging friendship networks. In addition, there was an emerging body of Uyghur fiction and poetry that addressed male alienation in the city, which provided a shared temporal and spatial discursive frame and a way of “being-with” (*billa*) the pain of other depressed young men. For Uyghur young men in the city, male-friendships and the stories friends told were taking on an increasingly vital role in Uyghur masculinity and social life.

The Trauma of Slow Dispossession

Ablikim’s detention in 2009 happened when he was on a public bus traveling from his school – which was in a predominantly Han neighborhood in the northern part of Ürümchi – a few weeks after the riots. As they were going through a checkpoint he realized that he was the only Uyghur on the bus. Not only that, but he had a mustache, which marked him not as an urban Uyghur with a high level of Chinese language education, but as a migrant from the countryside. His face could be read as overtly masculine and unassimilable in its difference relative to Han faces. He knew that, in the minds of many Han he met, he looked like a suicide bomber. The police took one look at him and immediately forced him off the bus. He said, “At that time I didn’t even know what I said. I was just so terrified. I didn’t know what they would do to me.” The blur of that trauma, although its impact was less immediate than he first anticipated, gave him an unshakable feeling of fear. He said that he felt completely exposed and vulnerable. After that he realized that being a Uyghur in Xinjiang meant that his body could be taken at any time.

Ablikim said his depression stemmed from both his experience with policing and the apathy and discrimination he received from his coworkers at the school. He said that the experience of being harassed and having no friends turned him into a “crazy person” (Uy: *sarang*).

After I was put in the interrogation room for a couple of hours that time in 2009 it took me years to feel normal again. Actually I still don’t feel normal. That was the whole

reason why I started hating that school and my job and why I eventually quit. It is so hard to get over things like that. For the next year I acted like a crazy person. I think I gave all of my coworkers a very bad impression of me. They thought I was some strange guy who was always nervous, always shy, never willing to talk or act in normal ways.

He found out later that his students and fellow teachers, who were mostly Han, openly referred to him as the “Mustache Teacher” (Ch: *Huzi Laoshi*) behind his back. He said that, perhaps for these reasons, and because he had no friends at the school, the administrators decided that he should be sent to the countryside as a political instruction “volunteer” – a practice which had become standard method of implementing colonial re-education in rural Xinjiang since the Maoist human engineering projects in the 1950s and 1960s and the implementation of the “Open Up the West” campaign in the 2000s. These projects were reenergized after the 2009 riots between Uyghur and Han migrants (Silk and Chen 2014). As Ablikim put it: “After I taught at that school in Ürümchi for two years they sent me away. But in the end I just quit. I couldn’t do it.” Since he had received a coveted opportunity to become a salaried government employee but could not follow through with the position, he felt deeply despondent. He did not see a clear way forward.

The institutions Ablikim found in the city were oriented around Hanness. As Sara Ahmed points out, racialized institutions “take the shape of ‘what’ resides within them” (2006: 132). In these kinds of homogenous spaces, bodies of the majority are “somatic norms” that make non-majority bodies feel “‘out of place,’ like strangers” (Ahmed 2006:133). Although he could never pass as Han, Ablikim was nevertheless called into these spaces which were built around the power and reach of Han bodies. When he entered these institutions he felt his body being stopped and searched over and over again both by security guards at the entrance to the institutions but also by all of the bureaucrats and other Han workers and students that he encountered. He felt as though every conversation, every encounter was filled with questions:

Who are you? What are you doing here? He felt as though he was being rejected by the institutions and was being forced to go back to Southern Xinjiang “where he belonged.” Accustomed to being rejected and out of place, he found himself always looking over his shoulder. He felt he had no choice but to opt out.

Lauren Berlant uses the phrase “slow death” to describe the “physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (2011: 95). For her, the key here is the way “mass physical attenuation” results from the precariousness of social violence and displacement. For Uyghurs this feeling was not only a condition of capitalist exploitation, as it was primarily in Berlant’s case. Instead for Uyghurs it was also a relationship of colonial domination. For this reason “slow death” felt like a “slow dispossession” – a physical wearing out that defined their historical existence, but that was directed by the institutions of the state rather than simply the forces of global capitalism. Given the way the “People’s War on Terror” directly impacted the agency of millions of Uyghurs—it prevented them from finding jobs or working their own land; blocked them from moving except under direct orders; directed them in what and how they could sing and dance; forced them to watch state television and proclaim their undying loyalty to the state; dictated what they could wear and how they cut their hair—it seemed as though slow dispossession adequately described the conditions under which many Uyghurs lived. The psychological violence of both exploitation and domination was expressed through the arbitrariness of detentions and disappearances. The lack of solidity in knowing the truth of what was happening and the apparent arbitrariness of who was chosen for detention placed the burden of narrating this process on the shoulders of the individual. There were no institutions that would help them assess the truth of what was occurring. Ablikim’s experiences

were thus often symptomatic of the experiences of someone attempting to live while slowly being subtracted from social life.

The trauma of police harassment and losing his job transformed Ablikim. As with many young Uyghur men, the past five years of intensified discrimination and disillusionment triggered a defensiveness that leads toward conflict escalation – a kind of lashing out in order to grasp for some agency. He told me a story over and over again about how sometime in 2013, four years after he was detained on the bus, he and one of his friends, Tursun, were walking in a market area near the train station when a Han policeman confronted them and asked to check their ID cards. He said, “I told him, ‘Why do you want to check our ID cards? We’re not doing anything. Why don’t you check some Han people’s ID cards?’ He immediately made us go with him to the police station. I wasn’t scared at all. Tursun was scared. But I wasn’t scared at all. I didn’t do anything wrong so why should I be scared of them? If they don’t respect me, why should I respect them?” After threatening them, eventually the police let them go. This incident was similar to numerous incidents I observed in which Ablikim and a wide range of other underemployed migrants confronted other people, both Uyghur and Han, over perceived slights or offenses. Beneath his placid expression, nervous eyes and trembling hands he carried a deep anger.

In segments of societies characterized by both economic and legal uncertainty, the role of honor takes on a greater significance (Brown 2016). When legal and institutional structures are set up to dominate and dispossess racialized minorities, members of such groups are often forced to place a great deal of weight on the ability of their reputations to protect them from imposed vulnerability. As resource-poor actors, the limited protection of a semblance of honor and dignity offers them a sense of existential security against feelings of emasculation. Reacting strongly to

perceived insults and slights is a way of reducing opportunities for exploitation. At the same time reacting strongly to strangers is radically different from sharing stories of insecurity with friends. When Ablikim lost his protective shield by telling his stories he was also negotiating his relationship to his sense of honor. He was in fact extending his honor to his friends and asking them to fight with him to preserve his dignity by exposing the vulnerability of his position. Our role as Ablikim's friend was to provide a buffer from the insults of strangers and the threat of police violence.

Telling Uyghur Stories of Slow Dispossession

As I got to know Ablikim better I suggested that we should meet regularly to read and discuss Uyghur language urban fiction which represents the ways in which Uyghurs figure out the city. Perhaps because Ablikim was chronically underemployed and because the two of us were becoming close friends, he agreed. The Uyghur language novella I suggested was *The Big City* by Perhat Tursun – one of the most provocative contemporary Uyghur language writers.³ I chose this novella purposefully since it staged the experience of a failed Uyghur professional in a Chinese city. I thought that reading it together with Ablikim might spark some interesting conversations about Ablikim's own experiences.

The Big City follows several days in the life of an unnamed Uyghur man who comes to Ürümqi from the countryside after finding a job in a government work unit. As we read through the story we began to understand the protagonist's estrangement in his Han-dominated work environment; we read how the young man was trying to escape the violence and poverty of the Uyghur homeland in Southern Xinjiang; we saw how he used mathematics as a language to transcend his minority status; and we saw how his coworkers rejected him and how he slowly descended into madness. All along the way we noticed the way the protagonist translated the

Chinese world around him in his mind. The character in the novella never quoted anyone speaking Chinese directly. Instead, he used Uyghur words and imagery to reconstruct a Chinese world as a vivid Uyghur world full of fog, cold, sewage, beauty, lust and loathing. The fogginess of the world made the future appear bleak and hazy, but it also held some potentiality as the protagonist wandered the city while dreaming of the past in the countryside and holding out hope for a place in the city.

As we read, Ablikim found striking parallels between the novella and the migrant life he knew. We sat close to each other, our knees touching, in the corner of a Turkish coffee house reading the novella. We spent hours discussing how disorienting life in the city was for young people who had just come from the countryside. Over bowls of rice pilaf (*polu*), hand-pulled noodles (*laghman*) and endless cups of sweet Turkish tea, we talked about how, in the city young migrants needed to develop a new sense of direction; how the geographical features that they had used to organize their world appeared scrambled. Mountains that used to be to the north were now to the southwest. Houses in the countryside were often built in reference to Mecca – a wall forming the spot where people prayed. He felt it was hard to locate one's self in the city since the orientation of apartment buildings were rectilinear and turned in directions dictated by the grid of the streets.

In addition, to this sense of disorientation, Uyghurs like Ablikim faced a daily threat of harassment and surveillance whenever they left their apartments. Prior to the protests of 2009, many Uyghur migrant workers or underemployed school teachers like Ablikim, lived in tightly-built neighborhoods of gray, single-story courtyard (Uy: *hoyla oy*; Ch: *pingfang*) housing.⁴ This housing, which was primarily owned by Uyghur and Hui migrants, was often built in an ad-hoc manner without the requisite legal paperwork. In the years that followed the eruption of violence

and suppression in 2009, much of this housing was demolished and replaced with government housing in high-rise apartment buildings. Neighborhoods with a high percentage of Uyghur residents that were not demolished were radically transformed through the introduction of new walls blocking off alleyways and the installation of tens of thousands of closed-circuit surveillance cameras, which were monitored from command centers in every city block. The gate-keepers Ablikim complained about were part of this security apparatus – reporting any suspicious activity directly to the neighborhood police station. Over recent years this system of constant surveillance intensified. This made Ablikim feel as though even living in the Uyghur parts of the city was no longer really safe.

We met at Ablikim’s apartment in a government housing project near Ürümchi’s South Bus Station. Being together in that space had an affect on us since it was a Uyghur-dominated area that was tightly controlled by local security forces. Neighborhood security officers had entered his home every few nights to check on the situation. Ablikim said that when they came:

They thought I was hiding something, so they searched all the rooms and looked under all the beds. Once they even demanded that I let them look at my computer. I was like, what the hell! You don’t know anything about me, but you think I’m some sort of criminal. I asked them if they had some sort of warrant that gave them the right to demand this sort of thing. And this made them really mad. But I was furious. What the hell! It is bad enough that they come here to check on us all the time, but then they try to push us around like this as well. What the hell!

As he spoke, Ablikim, who was normally so quiet and withdrawn, became really animated. He was pacing around. He normally never swore, but now he was interjecting curse words into every sentence.

A few minutes after he had told me this story the buzzer from the front door of his building rang. Both of us looked at each other. He said, “What the hell! I’m not answering.” My

mind raced as I thought about how I would explain what we were doing, an American researcher and Uyghur migrant alone in a Uyghur apartment, when the police started knocking on the door.

The knock never came. It must have just been neighbors who forgot their key to the building. We had merely been interpellated as disciplined subjects of the state. In an intensification of the way someone walking down the street is hailed when they hear a police officer yell “Hey you!” into a crowd, to use Althusser’s famous example (1971), with the buzzer the state had invaded even the most intimate spaces of Ablikim’s life. In the span of several minutes an intimate conversation between friends was shattered by the call of the state; for a second we were terrified. Then we turned to each other and said we were not answering the call. We decided in a split second to stand as friends and ignore the police.

This moment offers a window into the way psychic stress gets allocated to the least powerful in the racialized politics of Uyghur dispossession. Just as in the book, where the protagonist was pushed around by even the Han janitors in his work unit, Ablikim lived in a state of constant paranoia and fear. His neighbors and low-level security officers all seemed to have the agency to affect his life, but he felt as though he could affect no one. The toxic atmosphere of surveillance and oppression was immensely frustrating for him. It slowly wore him down. Living under conditions of slow dispossession was what Arthur Kleinman (2000) described as living with a particular Chinese form of “social violence.” He described the way differential controls of movement, lack of agency, and the disparity between public speech and lived reality fosters a “deep reservoir of rancor, bitter resentment, fantasies of revenge” (2000: 234) among marginalized people in contemporary China. Although Kleinman does not frame his analysis specifically around the stress of contemporary migrant and minority life, the conditions of both exploitation and domination under which Uyghurs lived their dispossession resonate with his

findings. In fact, it is likely that that Uyghur feelings are equal to, if not more intense, than Han experiences, particularly since the as counterterror industrial complex was called into existence.

Pun Ngai (2005) has noted the way the gendered and rural origins of Han migrant women in Shenzhen often resulted in the negative intersectionality. In a similar, yet even more dispossessing intersectionality, the gendered, ethno-racial positioning and rural origins of young Uyghur men acted as a triple intensifier. Of course, Uyghur women are also being placed in deeply precarious positions as well, but the threat of direct violence and profiling from the state was skewed heavily in the direction of men. Women were not often read as potential terrorists while rural-origin men were nearly always perceived as threatening. The everyday dispossessions experienced by Han migrant women under Chinese state-directed capitalist development as they were pulled into exploitative social relations in factories in Eastern China, were redirected toward Uyghur bodies as their bodies were both exploited and dominated as the primary object of terror capital. Their bodies justified the massive buildout of detention facilities. In their subtraction they offered numerous forms of surplus value: spaces open for Han settlement, the promise of commodified security technology that could be exported along the New Silk Road, and jobs for hundreds of thousands of police.

Friendship as a Way of Living with Dispossession

In *The Big City* the main protagonist continuously mutters the phrase “No one in this city recognizes me, so it’s impossible for me to be friends or even enemies with anyone.” When I asked the author of the novella, Perhat Tursun, why this phrase became the refrain of the book, Perhat said that the feeling of invisibility was something that gave the protagonist a “sense of security.” That is to say, when he muttered this under his breath he was reassuring himself of his existential stability. But, of course, in the novel the protagonist also actively seeks out

recognition from people he meets on the street. He wants to be seen as a carrier of knowledge; he wants to be loved and desired. The relative freedom of anonymous urban life was thus undercut by the atomizing effect of disconnection and loneliness.

As much as Ablikim identified with the story in the novella, reading it and telling his own story gave him a way of highlighting the differences between the suicidal trajectory of the protagonist and his own life path. Without his friendships, Ablikim said, he would have become lost in the city. He said that without the intervention of his “life and liver” friend Batur, he would have killed himself. That was why he followed Batur across the country first to Beijing and then back to Ürümchi. He felt as though he owed him his life. But there is more to the closeness between Batur and Ablikim than simply this. Like many young Uyghurs from the countryside, Batur himself had experienced devastating loss. As a child his father was killed in a street fight with other Uyghur men. His father’s murderer was never brought to justice and from his mother and siblings he learned how to keep on living. For him there were lots of reasons not to give up. Growing up in a small town in Southern Xinjiang, he had developed a close bond with his elementary school classmate Ablikim. They had shared everything. They had shared food with each other every day for years. They had often discussed their dreams of moving to the city and pursuing fame and fortune. They imagined that they would be “life and liver” friends for the rest of their lives.

Once when Batur stopped by while Ablikim and I were reading *The Big City* in our corner of the Turkish coffee shop, we started talking about Batur’s relationship to the city. As was his habit, Batur spoke in an off-the-cuff monologue. He said:

I like to think that life in the city is a joke, that everything about it is funny. If you approach it from this angle there is no reason to get frustrated or angry in reaction to it. Of course there are some things like sitting in a police station waiting for paperwork to be processed that can be infuriating. So that is why I just say, fuck it, and avoid those

situations at all cost. I don't even have an official Ürümchi resident permit (*hukou*) even though it says I do on my ID card. I'm totally fine with this. If they don't know about me, why should I tell them? The less they know the better. And since it says Ürümchi on my ID it is never a problem when I travel in the South. I run not in order to achieve something; just as a practice of living. If you stay active like this, the meaninglessness of life can't get you down. There is no meaning in life, but what are you going to do, kill yourself? No. I have to believe that parts of life are fun. And that is why I keep on living.

At this point he paused and motioned to Ablikim who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. He said: "He tried to kill himself twice, or at least talked really seriously about it. But I always told him, why are you talking like this? You have to live your life. Work at it." Ablikim did not say anything in response. He just smiled. I turned to Batur and asked him what friendships mean to him when he feels as though life is meaningless. He said:

Friendships are important because they let you sympathize with other people and share each other's pain. Friendship is what helps you get through those times in life when nothing seems to make sense. Friendships don't drag you down, they build you up. They are different from the obligations you have to your families. Some friends will fuck you up, so you have to stop hanging out with them. You can't do this with family. I don't have to like everything my family does, but I have to accept it. And just let it go. This isn't the same as my relationships with my friends. Friends build each other up. They help each other learn how to better pace themselves when they run in the system. It's about rhythm and breath-control.

For Batur and Ablikim, friendship was something that prevented them from panicking. It helped them to remember to keep breathing. Without it life in the city often seemed impossible. Their families back in the countryside could not provide the support they needed. In the city they needed "life and liver" friends in order to figure out their lives.

When Batur talked Ablikim down from the ledge, he did it by making him think about how to keep moving forward. They talked about philosophy and argued about religion; they talked about living honestly, criticized Uyghur pop culture icons and watched American comedies and science-fiction thrillers. But mostly what Batur did was more concrete than that. As with many of the pairs of "life and liver" friends I met, they felt that sharing food was

essential to their well-being. If a day passed without them a shared meal, both of them would begin to feel lonely. So Batur made Ablikim get out of the house and share a meal with him. He also helped Ablikim find jobs. On numerous occasions Batur quit jobs himself so that he could help Ablikim find work. He said he “had to do it.” It was what needed to be done and so he just did it. Ablikim’s life was part of his own life, so he did not see it as some sort of major sacrifice. It was part of the logic of their friendship. That was the main reason why they moved back from Beijing and why, more recently, Batur left a management position at a Turkish import company to start a new short-term job at a company that would agree to hire both of them. Of course Batur benefited from their relationship as well. The two of them argued with each other; but mostly Ablikim listened – and that gave Batur a sense of recognition and well-being as well. In many ways, Ablikim saw his life reflected in *The Big City*. Unlike the protagonist in the novel, Ablikim and many other young Uyghur men had friends around them who shared both their instability and their pain. Their attachment to the sociality of the countryside had not been as deeply cut off as it had been for the figure in the novella. They still knew that it was better to be precarious together than alone (Al-Mohammad 2012). The feelings of vulnerability that came from the control of the state, the policing of male migrant Uyghur bodies, and the shame that came from the lack of a stable social role in the city shaped how they cared for each other. Of course male friendship has been a major aspect of Uyghur masculinity for centuries (Roberts 1998), but in this current social moment when more and more young men are leaving their villages and delaying marriage until they have established themselves in the city, homosocial bonds appeared to have taken on a new significance.

The closeness of their friendship gave their life a sense of stability that would not have otherwise been there. There is a Uyghur saying that describes the sort of obligations their

relationship entailed: “A friend’s friendship is revealed the day tragedy befalls you” (Uy: *dostning dostluqi bashqa kün chüshkende biliner*). What this means is that friendship has the power to mitigate a failure in the present and sustain a horizon of possibility. What is particularly intriguing here is that it was the ongoing practice of friendship itself which gave weight and promise to the future of their narrative; Batur himself did not have the power to give Ablikim’s dreams possibility. The obligations of friendship here have a certain agency. The subjective-inbetween was what gave them their will to live. Despite the misery of the present, being together in their predicament gave them more than the sum of their individual narratives. As in spaces of violence in other parts of the world, life under constant threat had the effect of bringing their ethical and experiential intercorporeality into tighter focus (Al-Mohammad 2010). Violence, after all, hurts the most when it threatens those close to you and you are powerless to do anything about it (Jackson 2002: 39). In this case then, the inability of a Uyghur migrant to tell his story to a friend was a kind of suspension of social life; likewise sharing the pain of a friend was something that kept them alive.

Figuring out Native Masculinity

While reading *The Big City* Ablikim began to merge his own story with the narrative of the novel. In doing so he began to feel as though telling me his own story of the city was a way for him to figure out the city. As he spoke he became the center of a story of Ürümchi; the history of his depression took on a narrative form. It was a story both of coming-of-age and a broken journey. It had no neat conclusion, but it did have a tight focus. Ablikim’s story was about native dispossession, emasculation and the friendship it inspired. The anomie of city life, the way that it felt at times to be absolutely ignored and then suddenly to be noticed and predetermined as guilty, had made him feel as though he was nearing social death. He felt

emasculated and disempowered by his fellow teachers, students, passengers on the bus, the police and society in general.

It was only his male friends, his *jan-jiger dost*, who made him feel as though he could keep on living. Rather than being made a subject and realizing one's own subjectivity according to power relations—although this is also an aspect of Ablikim's subjectification—here I am positing that a subject also realizes his subjectivity through inter-subjective exchange with friends. This is more than a political relationship of power. As Veena Das and Bhrigupati Singh might argue, this is an ethical relationship of care: ethical relations that both escape and build political power relations (Das 2007; Singh 2015). These are relations that call into being the way one ought to care for the self and the other.

Near the end of my year watching Ablikim figure out the city, reading *The Big City* with him and listening him tell me his story, he told me: "This year is the most real that I've ever felt. I feel like I am closer to being honest about who I really am and what I actually want than I ever have been before. It has been really good for me." Reading and talking about Uyghur stories of life in the city had been therapeutic for him; it had also drawn us close, opened me up to his world of pain and anxiety and given me an analytic for understanding why "life and liver" friendships were so important to the everyday politics of masculinity I had closely observed throughout my fieldwork.

As has been frequently noted in the literature on post-traumatic depression, language often breaks down when attempting to tell stories of violent experience (Das 2003). The numbness of trauma and the slowness of Ablikim's descent into depression made it even harder to put words to his feelings. It was hard to say why he felt the way he did. By the end of the year when he said he felt "real," it seemed as though he was indicating that he had new means of

managing or coping with the pain he felt. Although his hands still shook involuntarily, by getting his story into a narrative form it seemed as though he was practicing a form of what psychotherapists might refer to as “the talking cure” in which a person “actively takes charge of his or her memories” (Jackson 2002: 56). Importantly though, he had entered into this treatment for his depression with a friend rather than a paid professional; rather than medicalizing his malady he had found a therapeutic practice in storytelling and friendship.⁵ That is to say, Ablikim had called me into more than a mere empathetic or sympathetic understanding of his emotional pain, rather, he had asked me, as he had asked Batur, to “lean into” his pain and participate in it; a therapeutic comportment that Robert Stolorow refers to as “emotional dwelling” (2014: 80). In doing so, we entered into a dialogue that “dwelt” on his trauma, and attempted to articulate how unendurable it felt and thus moved forward toward a positive ethics. By telling me his story, Ablikim was telling his story to someone other than Batur for the first time. His intersubjective framing of trust was thus expanding. And what his story was telling me was that the ethics of friendship could pull him back from the depths of suicidal depression.

Conclusions

In *The Soul at Work* Franco Berardi points out that one way to cope with depression is through friendship. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Berardi suggests that anti-melancholic friendship means “sharing a sense, sharing a view and a common rhythm” (215). The dialectic of slowness and terror that comes with social violence has the effect of intensifying these sorts of friendships, and if the stories that emerge are able to “re-focalize, to deterritorialize the mind and expressive flow” he argues that they can lead to new forms of ethical care of the self (Berardi 216). If depression is based on the “hardening of one’s existential refrain” (Berardi 216), then the therapy which responds to it is an opening up toward the other. This process resonates with Ivy

Schweitzer's recent formulation of feminist friendship as a process of making selves vulnerable to each other while at the same time recognizing the difference of the other (Schweitzer 2016: 357-358). She argues that through shared affection, people who may otherwise be alone can make life endurable. As Foucault noted in his later work (1986), friendship becomes a way of life when we begin to think with another, frame our norms with respect to another and allow another to shape our sense of self. Since 2009, Ablikim, and the dozens of other single male migrants I had observed, had repeatedly done this, but because of the ongoing, unending process of dispossession, he had often felt like it was not enough to give him a sense that he was "really" living.

By shifting the frame of the narrative of social violence away from the state, oppression and violence toward the work it takes to live in that precarious environment, *The Big City* gave Ablikim a new way of speaking and being heard. He said, "I feel as though this book was written just for me." It resonated so strongly with him because the feelings in the narrative were his own feelings; the voice of the figure in the book felt like his own voice. Since Uyghur experiences with the level of dispossession at that time were recent and public media was controlled by the state, there were very few public stagings of the experience of terror capitalism available for young Uyghurs to think with. They knew the stories of trauma told by their friends, but they had not seen those stories in print or on television. Reading Perhat Tursun's *The Big City* was thus a breakthrough for Ablikim. He felt as though he had found a friend in the novella. Framed in this way, it felt as though his own life had been given cultural form and substance. It felt again as though his life counted, not just to Batur, but also to a listener and reader like me. In this sense, the positive ethics of homosocial friendships in combination with new forms of fiction had enabled what might be thought of as a new anti-colonial politics of friendship.⁶

¹ Based on my findings and the self-reporting of these young men, these relationships rarely moved beyond the intimacy of close friendship to homosexual relations. Since they did not think of their relationships as queer in that sense, I have chosen not to use the framework of queer theories of friendship explicitly. I do however draw on Michel Foucault's (1986) understanding of "friendship as a way of life" – a text that is foundational to much of the scholarship on queer friendship.

² As scholars of late forms of global capitalism have noted (Standing 2011; Muehlebach 2012; Millar 2014), over the past few decades precarity has come to describe the labor conditions of more and more workers around the world. Migrants and ethno-racial minorities are disproportionately affected by this acute form of precariousness.

³ For more on Perhat Tursun's influence and writing see Byler 2018b.

⁴ See Dautcher 2009 for thick descriptions of life in these neighborhoods in the Uyghur city of Ghulja near the border with Kazakhstan.

⁵ Psychologists themselves have recently recognized that this form of coping with social vulnerability can be shown empirically through a large psychological study among socio-economically vulnerable British adolescents (Graber, Turner and Madill, 2015).

⁶ As Leela Gandhi (2006) has argued "guest-friendships" can produce a shared affective compoment and anarchist politics that invites the stranger to the self while at the same time refusing assimilation.

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